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Mammary Landscapes and Mother's Figure Vengeance and matrilineal legacy in the poetic drama of W.H. Auden

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Mother Figures

In 1929, aged 22, the poet W.H. Auden wrote in his journal of the “Tyranny of the Dead.” Analysing the psychological malaise attributed to the influence of ancestry, the precocious talent reasoned that “One cannot react against them.” (Mendelson 47). This conclusion, recognising the inability of the individual to slip his familial history and escape the legacy of his antecedents, recurs throughout Auden's early verse, in the form of the “ancestral curse” which “repeats its potent pattern,” in 'Under boughs between our tentative endearments,' (EA 29) and the “Family ghosts” he would identify in 'The string's excitement, the applauding drum.' (EA 32)

Auden's sense of the pressure of the social past - personal, familial and historical - finds its clearest expression in his poetic drama, which he commenced with *Paid On Both Sides* in 1928 and concluded with *On The Frontier*, the third of his collaborations with Christopher Isherwood, in 1938. Of the five plays written in this decade, four end with violent acts of revenge. The execution of these vengeful actions is always obscured by complex psychological compulsions, dense and confusing surrealistic humour and numerous dream-sequences and plays-within-plays which illustrate the distressed and conflicting duality of the central protagonists. Despite the confusing nature of the climactic downfalls in these parables, one motif remains clear throughout the drama: for Auden, the hatred which compels the act of vengeance survives matrilineally. Mothers psychologically compel their sons to acts of violence and revenge in order to retain family honour or win favour over their siblings or fathers. The central episodes of each play involve the hero identifying a division between familial relationships which engenders a spiritual and psychological impasse within himself. This neurosis is attributed to the influence of the mother, and the terms are by implication sexual. The protagonist finds his lived experience compromised by the knowledge of his past life and maternal obligations, dominating influences which produce emotional disaster in sons and leave them divided, perpetuating social violence:

Before this loved one
Was that one and that one
A family
And history
And ghost's adversity...(EA 31, 1-5).

This article will focus on *The Ascent of F6* (1936) and work back to *Paid On Both Sides*, as both plays explore the psychological malaise of the protagonist and the domineering influence of the mother to striking effect. These dramas find their central protagonists grappling with the malignant influence of mothers who compel the climactic acts of revenge through the neurotic anxiety they have engendered within their sons. The first act of vengeance examined is figurative and illusory as the mother of the Ransom brothers pits her neurotic sons against each other in an Oedipal battle for glory or favour in *F6*. The second, more formative, action to be examined is literal and physical, as the matriarchs of *Paid's* Nower and Shaw families demand that their remaining sons commit acts of murderous revenge for slain fathers and brothers. Both are undoubtedly responses to the psychic deprivation and distress caused by the mother characters and their divided affections for their sons. While much work remains to be conducted in gendered approaches to the study of these texts, this article will explore the significance of vengeance and matrilineal legacy in W.H. Auden's poetic drama and locate this theme within the context of his poetry from the late Twenties to the late Thirties. This study anticipates further discussion of the role of matriarchal figures and gender debates arising from post-war literature.

Mammary Landscapes and *The Ascent of F6*

The most telling characteristic of Auden's poetic drama is encapsulated in his prologue from *The Orators*:

By landscape reminded once of his mother's figure
 The mountain heights he remembers get bigger and bigger:
 With the finest of mapping pens he fondly traces
 All the family names on the familiar places.
 ...
 And yet this prophet, homing the day is ended,
 Receives odd welcome from the country he so defended:
 The band roars 'Coward, Coward', in his human fever,
 The giantess shuffles nearer, cries 'Deceiver'. (EA 61, 1-16)

Fuller's memorable term "mammary landscape" (89), to describe the adolescent male's mother-fixation, makes apparent the source of Auden's protagonist's neurosis, and the way in which these complex psychological compulsions are interwoven with topographical symbolism and familial history.

The central motif of *The Ascent of F6*, the mammary landscape of the symbolic mountain F6 itself, is certainly Auden and Isherwood's most striking dramatic device. Where earlier plays *Paid on Both Sides* and *The Dance of Death* had been geographically ambiguous at best and *The Dog Beneath the Skin* is characterised by an elliptical quest across Europe, *F6* is notable in its spatial focus. The drama is the most straight-forward and easily decipherable of any of the pair's works and the relatively direct treatment of the three central symbols of mountain, mother and hero figure display an assured familiarity with the mechanisms of poetic drama on the part of the two writers.

The narrative of *F6* is simple enough: Keen mountaineer Michael Ransom is approached by his twin brother, the colonialist Sir James Ransom, to conquer the mountain F6 which bestrides the border of British and Ostnian Sudoland before the Ostnians. Whoever scales the mountain first will rule all of Sudoland. The jingoistic colonialism of the scenario is evident in the phonetic *pseudo*-land. Michael, a committed man of action, refuses the quest, not wishing to debase his purist love of mountaineering with such a grotesque pursuit of power. Auden's *The Prolific and the Devourer* contextualises the scene:

"The enemy was and still is the politician, i.e. the person who wants to organise the lives of others and make them toe the line. I can recognise him instantly in any disguise... and I cannot meet him however casually without a feeling of fear and hatred and a longing to see him (or her, for the worst ones are women) publicly humiliated" (EA 399).

This antagonism of the establishment here aligns Auden the poet with his hero creations. Closer inspection of the actions of Ransom will reveal notable similarities within his personal crisis with the divided interests of Auden himself. The "enemy" cannot persuade Ransom to undertake the task, so they enlist his mother to ensure that he accepts. Mrs Ransom reveals her wish that her son become "truly strong" (Pl 313) and admits to withholding her love in order that he may not become dependent on constant praise, like his brother:

I know my son the greatest climber in the world;

I know F6 the greatest mountain in the world. (312, 5-9)

...

You were to be unlike your father and your brother

You were to have the power to stand alone;

And to withhold from loving must be all my love.

...There was a mother crucified herself

To save her favourite son from weakness...(Pl 1.3. 313, 33-38)

Michael is predictably affected by the entreaties of his mother and, relenting, agrees to lead the expedition.

The heroic quest which Ransom's mother persuades him to undertake is swiftly revealed to be a journey to the border territory of his own neurosis, to be concluded with a vengeful act of psychologically-willed violence. F6 will represent a site for the navigation of his own heroic limits and the analysis of his motives as a mountaineer. This quest mirrors Auden's own very public exploration of the paradoxical dilemma which faced the socially minded poets of his 'Oxford' group. Although Auden is committed to a social art of communal function, which is intended to communicate with his notion of the "group" and society, the impulses which inform this obligation are born from a deeply individual, internalised sense of conflict:

In Ransom Auden was delineating a double contradiction that he knew threatened himself: the contradiction between the public pursuit of fame and the private neurosis that makes it so fatally attractive... A mountaineer's triumph seems rather less impressive if he announces that he conquered his peak neither for England nor because it was there, but because it symbolised his mother's inaccessible breast. (Mendelson 285)

Although Ransom's expedition will prove to be dictated by his own capacity to become Auden's conception of the "Truly Strong Man," the fact that he accepts the celebrated public role afforded him by the Colonial Office and the newspaper industry reveals that his quest is doomed from the start. His hallucinatory meeting with the Abbott in the final stages of his ascent reveals him to be literally held to ransom by his Oedipal incentive to fulfil the quest and impress his mother. The Abbott's prophetic crystal exposes Ransom's desires to be the leader of the weak and pathetic, characterised by the four "Truly Weak" men who assist him on his quest. This narcissistic appeal to individual power leads Ransom to confront the mystical Demon at the top of the mountain.

Rupert Doone once complained that all of Auden's plays were resolved "in dream" (Fuller 200). Both *The Ascent of F6* and *Paid on Both Sides* hinge upon this same device. The revelation that the mountain Demon is Ransom's mother comes as little surprise as the chorus yells nationalistic sentiments redolent of the appeals to duty of R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* or the confrontational jingoism of Jessie Pope. Ransom's death at the close of the play is brought about by his determination to "overcome the demon by will..." his wish to "destroy the demon is itself the Demon's curse" (Mendelson 253). Ransom's inability to overcome his Oedipal narcissism brings about his demise and finds the cause of the neurotic malaise to be the psychological damage created by a manipulating mother.

This neurotic will to overcome the demon activates the compelling revenge scenario whereby, after losing the climactic game of chess to James within the dream sequence, Ransom wishes death upon his brother. The responsibility for this vengeful psychic fratricide lies with the malignant influence of the Ransom mother as Michael wails: "It wasn't my fault! The Demon gave the sign" (*Pl* 351). The intentional disparities in the affection she has shown to her sons, a psychological

conditioning implemented in infancy, finds its manifestation as the delirious Ransom takes revenge upon his brother within his dying dream at the summit of the mountain. The recognition of this Oedipal bind leaves Ransom, finally alone, at the peak of F6, recognising that the tragedy of his ascent exists not in the external influences of his mother, brother, and the absent father figure he had failed to transcend, but rather in the internal conflict and neurotic dread engendered by matrilineal legacy and the paradoxical limiting of his own attempts at self-determination. Louis MacNeice, with typical poise and insight, explains the significance of this discovery in his *Modern Poetry*:

“...Auden, while regarding so many of our neurosis as tragic, so many of our actions as self-deception, ... believes, ... that neurosis is the cause of an individual’s development. Such a psychological dialect reflects itself in the paradoxes and tension of his poems.” (173)

More than any of Auden’s other dramas, *The Ascent of F6* grapples with his concept of the Truly Strong Man. Taking T.E. Lawrence as their model, Auden and Isherwood used mountaineering as a means for exploring the compelling paradox that the greatest possible strength is simultaneously the greatest weakness. In 1934 Auden surmised that T.E. Lawrence was one of those who: “exemplify most completely what is best and significant in our lives, our nearest approach to a synthesis of feeling and reason, act and thought” (Mendelson 181). Lawrence’s life was “an allegory of the transformation of the Truly Weak Man into the Truly Strong Man” (ibid), a transformation which would have saved both Ransom and John Nower in *Paid On Both Sides*. Of crucial importance to Auden and Isherwood’s allegorical combination of the two Lawrences, Arabia and D.H., is the centrality of the mother figure as a catalyst for the climactic act of vengeance at the drama’s conclusion.

As a final comment on the fratricidal vengeance of Auden’s finest drama, it is worth noting that the play was dedicated, apparently unironically, to his brother John.

Paid On Both Sides

Auden’s first play, *Paid on Both Sides* begins and ends with a death. The drama commences with the news that John Nower’s father has been ambushed and killed by his feuding enemies, the Shaws. News of his death sends Joan Nower, his wife, into premature labour, and John is born, a “new ghost;” a child whose mother condemns him to “learn from old termers what death is” (Pl 15).

An unspecified amount of time elapses between the infant’s first squeal and the introduction of adult John, discussing his cousin Dick’s departure for the Colonies. The significance of John’s birth and Dick’s departure is framed by a fearsome generations-old feud between the two mill-owning families. Dick’s emigration from Lintzgarth constitutes the only peaceful exit from the scene. The circumstances of John’s birth, father-figure already absent, make it immediately apparent that he is a child of the feud; conceived in its knowledge, brought forth amidst its bloodshed and bound by its familial legacy. This theme of familial legacy and inherited obligations define the actions of Nower throughout the play and tempers his relationship with the daughter of his family’s enemies, Anne

Shaw. Nower continues the feud through his arranged murder of Red Shaw, the man who killed his father, and the execution of a Shaw spy. Although a truce is called in order to celebrate the marriage of Nower to Anne, the mother of the dead Shaw spy demands vengeance and orders her remaining son to kill Nower: "Kill him... Have you forgotten your brother's death?" (*Pl* 32). The drama ends where it began, with a dead Nower man and the feud unabated.

The "family ghosts" of the Nowers and the Shaws are comparable to the dead miners forgotten in the disfigured, infertile landscape of Auden's 'Who stands, the crux left of the watershed.' The alienation of the derelict mine-works that define the social and topographical landscape of Auden's early border poem is recontextualised in *Paid* as the malignant generational legacy simultaneously alienates and contorts the young descendants of the feud. The primitive menace of a report that: "last night at Hammergill / A boy was born fanged like a weasel" (*Pl* 19) strikes an uneasy parallel with Nower's historical diagnosis as he reflects on the revenge killing of Red Shaw and The Spy: "Always the following wind of history / Of others' wisdom" (*Pl* 21). Auden makes it clear that the vengeful, cyclical continuation of the feud is dictated by the older generation of the play. Nower recognises that he is obliged to assume his father's violence despite the "disaster" that the Chorus warns of as "War is declared" in Auden's appropriately Wilfred Owen-indebted "The Spring unsettles sleeping partnerships": "These gears which ran in oil for week / By week, needing no look, now will not work" (*Pl* 21). The August 1928 composition, here re-appropriated as an affecting choric introduction to the play's central dream-sequence, makes apparent the inevitable rejection of the old way of things. As the soil freezes and the mining apparatus of the industrialised landscape begins to falter and fail, so too does the resolve of Nower. While Auden and his contemporaries were born too late to serve in the First World War they nevertheless found their early years entirely defined by its terrible legacy. With this in mind it is almost inevitable that a socially-minded writer such as Auden should seek to engage with the concept of feudal legacy on a contextual as well as formal level.

Rainer Emig explains coming of age within the familial feud logic of *Paid* writing that that "Learning... is mere initiation," in his *Towards a Postmodern Poetics*. Understanding family history in the mill towns of *Paid*: "does not lead to individuality, but to conformity." (31) The Chorus makes it abundantly clear that the historical process of the feud must be revered with the lines: "All pasts / Are single old past now" (*Pl* 27). Once again Auden turns to a composition from *Poems* (1928) for the utterances of his Chorus (in total, seven poems are recontextualised across the two existing versions of *Paid on Both Sides*) in the form of "To throw away the key and walk away'. This is perhaps the most revealing of *Paid*'s choruses as it warns that the "abrupt exile" (*Pl* 27), like that of Dick's emigration, cannot escape the feudal heritage. The chorus warns of the mutational effects of the society: the feud will not change, rather the hero who attempts to resolve the conflict will be reformed by historical repetition:

The future shall fulfil a surer vow

...

Not swooping at the surface still like gulls

But with prolonged drowning shall develop gills. (*Pl* 27, 28-32)

The tragedy of the feud will not change. Rather, it will reoccur with every “new ghost” that is born, deformed by the cycle of vengeance. To attempt to change or halt the violent acts of revenge would be, the play suggests, almost unsporting. The notion that the hero must fulfil his role obligingly once again brings to mind the climactic scenes of *Journey's End*, the most popular play of the previous year, and serves as an illuminating theme which unites all of Auden's dramatic output. Sherriff's sympathetically human and decent portrayal of the unenviable duties of the First World War soldier illuminates Auden's own decidedly clinical and unflinching study of compulsion and neurosis. This understanding of unavoidable duty is combined with the propagandist sentiment of Sir Henry Newbolt's exhortations to “Play up! Play up! And play the game!” (Baker, 1996, 118-119) in his 1897 war poem 'Vitai Lampada', and is confirmed by the assurances of the chorus that the feud is inescapable. The hero figure within *Paid* is the person who can affect his own spiritual change, rather than seek to change societal forms.

The exploration of the hero's true nature is instigated in one of Auden's finest, and most striking, dramatic sequences. The central trial scene of *Paid on Both Sides* occurs within Nower's dream, after the execution of The Spy. John Fuller points towards the work of psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers and his posthumously published book *Conflict and Dream* (1923) for the basis of the dream-sequence (27). The text, which details Rivers's work with shell-shocked soldiers returning from the First World War (his most famous patient was Siegfried Sassoon) provided the trial concept for Nower's interrogation of the accused Spy, who is revealed to be an abstraction of Nower himself, sharing the same pain. The surrealist dream-sequence trial, which features stock figures from the Mummerys' Play, such as Father Christmas as a judge, and Nower's mother Joan as a warder, brandishing a “gigantic feeding bottle” (*Pl* 22) loaded with Oedipal symbolism, serves to unite the psychological damage of the play's feud with that of the World War One generation who formed the immediate (and largely absent) generational male role models for Auden and his contemporaries. Nower's jingoistic speech at the outset of the trial recalls Stanhope's reasoning with the cowardly Hibbert in *Journey's End*:

“I know we have and are making terrible sacrifices, but we cannot give in. We cannot betray the dead. As we pass their graves can we be deaf to the simple eloquence of their inscriptions, those who in the glory of their early manhood gave up their lives for us? No, we must fight to the finish.” (*Pl* 22)

Here it seems that the unconscious desires of Nower are towards the continuation of the violence as he eulogises the dead. The appearance of the Man-Woman as a witness represents a different victim of

the feud: namely the repression of natural love. The Man-Woman is introduced as a “prisoner of war” (*Pl* 23) and speaks in the half-rhymes of Wilfred Owen. The formation of the hermaphroditic figure, a projection of subconscious libidinous duality, is linked to the spiritual and psychological distress caused by the legacy of feudal hatred:

Because I’m come it does not mean to hold
An anniversary, think illness healed,
As to renew the lease, consider costs
Of derelict ironworks on deserted coasts.
Love was not love for you but episodes,
Traffic in memoirs, views from different sides;
You thought oaths of comparison a bond,
And though you had your orders to disband,
Refused to listen... (*Pl* 23, 18-26)

Once again the downturn of the physical landscape is linked to the vendetta; but in the case of the Man-Woman’s speech the source of the psychic confusion is rooted in the repression of desire. The influence of D.H. Lawrence’s *Fantasia of the Unconscious* is here aligned with the teachings of Homer Lane, who had: “spoken out against repression of our real desires” and “...pointed out that much of our behaviour stems from our earliest experiences of fear and punishment” (Fuller 26). It is not the conflict of the dispute which has caused Nower’s mental disorder within the dream-sequence. A reading of the scene informed by Lawrence and Lane directs towards the domination of the mother as the source of neurotic dread in *Paid*. The “both sides” of the title becomes the psychological division in Nower himself. The malignant influence of mothers as the chief bearers of the feud has historical, social, psychological and sexual significance for the children born in its legacy. Nower acknowledges this as he refers to himself and The Spy as “sharers of the same house” (*Pl* 26). As both sides of the same individual self, they are bound by the same ancestral history but are inaccessible to each other except via the subconscious duality of the Man-Woman and the recognizably sexualised mother figure.

The most significant solution to the feud offered by the Chorus begins with the decision to “throw away the key” (*Pl* 27). The only escape from the historical entropy of the play is through what Samuel Hynes terms a “voluntary journey into the unknown” (51). Dick’s emigration does not achieve this, as he was escaping the geographical location of the feud, but not his own historical moorings in its bloodshed. A new beginning requires a complete rejection of the past. However the concept was still formative, even for Auden, and the Chorus offers no guidelines as to how this can be achieved or what to expect. The tragedy of the play exists in a realisation that the matrilineal damage of the feud will prevail until such a solution can be realised. The deftly judged closing chorus promises the

continuing legacy of the feud, propagated by the mother figure, since “Though he believe it, no man is strong”:

... he is defeated; let the son

Sell the farm lest the mountain fall;

His mother and her mother won. (*Pl* 33, 25-30)

As the drama ends where it began, with Joan Nower alone, the conclusion of the vengeance she swore at the outset of the play reiterates the mother's perpetuation of the feud. The vengeance, and the victory, is not limited to one generation of matriarch. Auden's insistent “...and her mother” emphasises the enduring power of the maternal figure and the cyclical nature of the feud society. Just as Mrs Nower resolves to have Shaw killed, Mrs Shaw is obliged to respond in kind. The matrilineal organisation of the Lintzgarth and Natrass society made it impossible for John to “bring home a wife,” as he would have been obliged to live in her familial home. From the title of the play, a line taken from Anglo-Saxon matriarchal revenge epic *Beowulf*, to Nower's compulsions, the domination of the mother guides the hand of the son. The climactic act of revenge is insisted by the malignant maternal influence, the bearer of the feud.

Matrilineal Vengeance

W.H. Auden's developing understanding of oedipal anxiety finds a variety of voices throughout his poetic drama and 1930's verse. Ransom reads from Dante at the outset of *F6* and declares: “O, happy the foetus that miscarries and the frozen idiot that cannot cry 'Mama!'” (*Pl* 296). Ransom and Nower are definitively linked by the Oedipal narcissism which compels their respective acts of vengeance. The dependency of the infant upon the mother, and the long-standing psychic damage this instils in young men, is earliest expressed in Auden's August 1929 poem 'On Sunday Walks' which finds mothers “Not meaning to deceive” (*EA* 34) and subconsciously willing their sons to remain dependent on them. As a result, their: “Wish to give suck / Enforces make-believe” (*EA* 34). To return to the 1929 journal that provided the point of departure for this study, Auden can be found extrapolating that homosexuality, like hatred, is transmitted matrilineally as a result of excessive devotion and dependency:

“...buggery seems a more unconscious rejection against her sexual teaching... i.e. the bugger got too much mother love, so sheers off women altogether.” (Mendelson 59)

Despite this “sheering off” Auden finds his homosexual Oedipal narcissism paradoxically drawing him irrepressibly back towards his mother in his grand-standing 'Letter To Lord Byron':

“We imitate our loves : well, neighbours say

I grow more like my mother every day.” (*EA* 191)

Auden's final act of matrilineal vengeance, at the conclusion of his *On The Frontier* collaboration with Isherwood, is perhaps the most revealing of his troubled, contradictory, and blackly comic exploration of the concept of maternal anxiety. Valerian, the profiteering arms manufacturer is confronted by Grimm, the trooper who had been unjustly fired by his company and is now fixated on murderous revenge. The final twist of the drama occurs as Valerian coolly tries to manoeuvre his way out of the situation by targeting Grimm's own Oedipal narcissism:

Valerian: "Tell me about your mother... That's always interesting. I expect you were an only child. Her pet... The son who was to achieve wonders. What did she teach you, at nights, beside the cot? What did she whisper?"

Grimm [screams and shoots]: Leave my mother alone, you bastard!" (*Pl* 3.2, 412-413)

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